

DIY Morality:
Stories from the Australian Blogosphere

Submitted by

Nicholas Hookway BA (Hons)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Sociology)

University of Tasmania, February 2011

Declaration of originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis, nor does the thesis contain any material that infringes copyright.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the University of Tasmania's Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee.

Nicholas Hookway

6th February 2011

Statement for authority to access

This thesis may be available for loan and limited copyrighting in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

Nicholas Hookway
6th February 2011

Statement of Ethical Conduct

The research associated with this thesis abides by the international and Australian codes on human and animal experimentation, the guidelines by the Australian Government's Office of the Gene Technology Regulator and the rulings of the Safety, Ethics and Institutional Biosafety Committees of the University.

Nicholas Hookway
6th February 2011

Acknowledgements

Popular PhD mythology suggests that the ‘acknowledgements’ section is typically the only part of one’s thesis that actually gets read – better make it good I guess!

First, I want to express deepest gratitude to my supervisor Dr Daphne Habibis. Her intellectual guidance, nurturing spirit and support, particularly during some difficult times, has been deeply valued and appreciated. From our regular supervision meetings and art appreciation courses in Evandale, to invaluable advice not to watch too much late-night tennis and other important life lessons, you have been a foundation for professional, personal and intellectual growth.

Second, there are a number of other colleagues within the School of Sociology and Social Work at the University of Tasmania who have made significant contributions to the conceptualisation of this thesis. Dr Timothy Phillips has been an important influence and friend who has helped shape my sociological identity. Our discussions of the intersections between sociology and music, film and pop culture were motivating and provided welcome relief from the grind of PhD writing. Also, I would like to thank Associate Professor Doug Ezzy for his critical and constructive comments on an earlier draft of the thesis. While ownership for errors fall solely on my shoulders, the thesis is a much better product for his involvement. Acknowledgement must also be given to Dr Sonya Stanford, Dr Margaret Hughes, Dr Karen Willis, Dr Kris Natalier, Dr Emily Bishop and Ms Kellie Brandenburg for their ongoing encouragement and collegial support – and to Jane Emery for her keen editing eye, good humour and the *Mad Men* referral, and Rebecca Burgess for her diligence and administrative support.

There are also many members of my family network and circle of friends that have shared this journey with me – some for better and worse. My friend, colleague and IT guru, Damien ‘Gerard’ Collins insisted on a special mention, and fully deserves one. Other notable mentions go to Dr Paul Willis and Zale Young. Paul, our long-term friendship and shared naughtiness are sustaining influences for me. Zale – your ease, grace and rock sensibilities are a welcome addition to my world. Also, thanks to

Brendan and Trish for initiating my conversion to the new age – which is now complete! To my family, especially mum and dad, and my sister Sam, thanks for your unfailing support, encouragement and ongoing patience with my absences. I must also acknowledge additional sources of inspiration including Roger Federer, Muse, Placebo, Arcade Fire, Bertie Blackman, Sigur Ros and Black Rebel Motorcycle Club.

My dearest thanks must also go to the lovely Miss Melody West whose love and ‘sheer operational brilliance’ is second to none. I could write a thesis length of acknowledgements for you my darling. You have been a lover, a carer, a friend, a research assistant and general all-round super-star throughout this sometimes-tumultuous journey. I look forward to taking the next part of our journey together.

It would be remiss of me to forget the vital role of the ‘bloggers’. There would be no thesis without you. Thank you for taking your time and energy to hang out with me in online lands. While we never met face to face, it has been a joy and a privilege to have shared in your personal moral worlds.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated in loving memory of Ami Pepper.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	11
The End of Morality: From ‘Tradition’ to ‘Psychological Man’	12
Recovering Morality.....	15
The Present Study.....	16
Key Arguments and Thesis Structure.....	18
Chapter 1.....	22
Moral Decline Sociology and the Legacy of Durkheim.....	22
Introduction.....	22
Sociology and Morality: The Beginnings.....	22
Durkheim: Morality and the Social Metaphysic.....	24
Moral Decline Take 1: The ‘Cultural Pessimists’	28
Moral Decline Take 2: The ‘Communitarians’	37
Problematising The Durkheimian Legacy	43
Conclusion.....	52
Chapter 2.....	55
Beyond Durkheim and Decline: Theorising Alternative.....	55
Moral Structures.....	55
Introduction.....	55
From Society to Self: Bauman’s Postmodern Ethics.....	56
‘The Return of Conscience’: From the ‘Raftsmen’ to the ‘Sailors’	57
‘Being for the Other’: The Sailor’s Anchor.....	60
‘Defence’ and ‘Opposition’: What Bauman Gives and Doesn’t Give.....	62
‘Defence’: Key Dimensions Of Contemporary Moral Practice.....	63
‘Opposition’: Critiquing ‘Being for the Other’	65
‘Being for the Other’ in ‘Liquid’ Times: A Lost Hope?.....	73
A Return to Self: Foucault and Taylor.....	75
Conclusion.....	83
Chapter 3.....	86
‘Entering the Blogosphere’: Research Methodology and Methods.....	86
Introduction.....	86
Methodology.....	87
Methods: From the Diary to the Blog.....	89

Into the Blogosphere	92
Entering the Blogosphere: A Path Less Travelled.....	96
Selection Criteria.....	97
Finding Blogs.....	99
Sampling Blogs.....	99
Establishing an Online Presence.....	100
Blog Data Collection.....	101
Phase 2: Soliciting bloggers.....	103
Selecting and Advertising Within a Blog Community.....	103
Researcher/Respondent Interaction.....	104
Impression Management, Anonymity and Trustworthiness.....	106
Online Interviews.....	108
Interview Instrumentation.....	109
Online Interviewing Process.....	111
Sample Representativeness.....	114
Data Analysis.....	115
Ethics of Blog Research.....	118
Conclusion.....	121
Chapter 4.....	123
DIY Morality: Choosing, Embodied, Feeling and Authentic Moralities.....	123
Introduction.....	123
DIY Morality: 'I Believe In Myself'	124
A DIY Sin: 'Beyond My Control'	132
Urban 'Strange Encounters'	137
A Feeling Morality: 'I do what feels right'	144
An Authentic Morality: 'Being True to Yourself'	149
Conclusion.....	153
Chapter 5.....	157
'DIY Spiritualists', 'DIY Catholics' and 'Anti-DIY' Fundamentalists.....	157
Introduction.....	157
The DIY Spiritualists.....	159
The DIY Catholics.....	176
Anti-DIY Morality.....	182
Conclusion.....	190

Chapter 6.....	193
Love as ‘Moral Space’: The Morality of ‘Moving On’	193
Introduction.....	193
Bauman on ‘Liquid Love’	194
Love Will Tear Us Apart.....	195
Liquid Love ‘Victims’ and ‘Resistors’	199
Moral ‘Beginnings’ and ‘Endings’	203
Love Confessions: ‘Am I a Good Person’?.....	204
Conclusion.....	213
Chapter 7.....	216
Animals and Ethics: Being for the Non-Human Other.....	216
Introduction.....	216
The ‘Particular’ Other’: Kesi The Orphaned Orangutan.....	217
‘Facing’ Up to Animal Death.....	220
Animals and Demoralisation.....	224
Animals as Good Works.....	228
Conclusion.....	234
Chapter 8.....	237
Conclusion.....	237
Introduction.....	237
‘Moral Endings’ – A Theoretical Critique.....	237
Major Findings.....	241
Limitations.....	248
Future Research.....	251
Conclusion.....	256
References.....	258
Appendices.....	292
Appendix A: Research Website.....	292
Appendix B: Recruitment Invite.....	293
Appendix C: Online Interview Guide.....	294
Appendix D: Follow-up Interview Invite.....	297
Appendix E: Cast of Characters.....	299

Abstract

This thesis is about how contemporary morality is understood and constructed by a group of Australian bloggers. Its central argument is that the bloggers depict morality as an actively created, non-conforming and autonomous *do-it-yourself* project, configured in different variations of self-responsibility, bodily encounter, emotion, feeling and ideals of ‘being-true-to-yourself’. The thesis challenges the moral ‘decline’ arguments of ‘communitarian’ and ‘cultural pessimist’ theorists whose views on morality are rooted in Durkheimian assumptions concerning the egoistic tendencies of human nature and the need for authoritative social structures. Drawing upon the work of Bauman (1993), Foucault (1986), Taylor (1992), Ahmed (2000) and Irigaray (1991), the thesis argues that these perspectives ignore the ethical significance of self, body, emotions and ideals of authenticity.

The study is based on a qualitative analysis of 44 Australian blogs combined with 25 online in-depth interviews. The empirical data points to the self as the central site for the construction of morality, and shows how this applies across the spectrum of religious beliefs. The thesis examines how this operates in two spheres of moral action: love and intimacy, and human–animal relations. Love is argued to be an important moral space in which reflexive questioning of ‘Am I a good person?’ and ‘Did I do the right thing?’ are important in the context of ‘breaking up and ‘moving on’. On the other hand, stories of human–animal relations reveal animals as significant ethical Others that speak not only to ‘particular’ moral relations with the ‘non-human’ but also with ‘ourselves’. The thesis concludes by suggesting that DIY moral forms provide powerful moral ideals that operate outside prevailing models of ‘narcissism’ and ‘community breakdown’.